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An Alternative to Traditional First-Year Orientation Programs: The Wilderness Experience as a Rite of Passage

By Matthew Fiori

Background

Perhaps the most exciting period of a young person's life is the time when they leave home and set out on their own. For many, this takes the form of attending college, an experience that can be a cause of great worry as well as great excitement. Inarguably, the first year of college is a critical time in a person's development, as the restraints of home and high school vanish, leaving the young adult with little direct support or guidance. Although retention of new students is a major concern for most institutions of higher education (Gass, 1990), in many cases there doesn't seem to be enough direct support for students' success early on in the college experience. Universities have been creating and recreating freshman orientation programs for years with the hopes of increasing rates of student retention, as well as easing the transition to college life. As reported by Davis-Berman & Berman (1996), some of the stronger first-year orientation programs deal with matters of academics, social integration, and the combination of academics with social living. Occasionally, these programs might include work on a challenge/ropes course, which can

help boost self-confidence and develop inter-personal relationships. According to R. Kim, Student Activities Coordinator at CSU Monterey Bay, (personal communication, March 26th, 2003) though usually present in rhetoric, but which seems to be missing in practice from most orientation programs, is the idea that first-year students are undergoing a significant change in identity. The roles of a post-adolescent differs greatly from that of an adult, and that fact ought to be transmitted to first-year students during orientation so that a change in self-image and behavior can be made to accompany the change of roles they are about to undergo.

Thesis

Only since the development of the Dartmouth College program in 1935 and the Prescott College program in 1968 have universities been employing the wilderness as a setting for freshman orientation (Gass, 1987). Although the goals vary, "some of these programs have been developed . . . to ease the transition of students to college, to reduce the attrition of students, and/or to provide a means of facilitating student developmental growth" (Gass, 1987 p. 30). What may be implied by the nature of these programs, but rarely, if ever, stated, is that the wilderness orientation is more than the sum of its parts. By this I

mean that students who take part in wilderness orientations have the opportunity to undergo a rite of passage into college life, a symbolic journey from the old to the new, where they can explore themselves in isolation from the outside world in order to find something within that can carry them through the challenging times that await.

Analysis

First, it is important to understand what a wilderness orientation consists of. Fears and Denke (2001) describe it as a program that takes “a small group of first-year students into a wilderness setting where backpacking and camping are the primary outdoor activities. This type of program includes a developed set of goals . . . that guide the structure of the entire program” (p. 7). Such goals can include learning map and compass skills, orienteering, Leave No Trace philosophy, knowledge of natural history, presenting skills, and other wilderness leaderships skills. The overall aim of this type of orientation experience, though, is to provide participants with “a more involved and unique opportunity to make connections with people prior to their first day of classes” (Fears and Denke 2001, p.7). The wilderness orientation also provides a unique and valuable setting for first-year students to connect with themselves through the use of reflective journals, solo hikes, and

other challenges such as rock climbing that require students to call on an inner reserve.

Rites of passage have been around since the dawn of humankind, but it wasn’t until the last century that scholars have started to seriously study them. According to the Encyclopedia Britannica:

The first substantial interpretation of [rites of passage] as a class of phenomena was presented in 1909 by the French anthropologist and folklorist Arnold van Gennep (1873–1957), who coined the name rites of passage. Van Gennep saw the rites as means by which individuals are eased, without social disruption, through the difficulties of transition from one social role to another. Van Gennep held that the rites consist of three distinguishable, consecutive elements, called *separation*, *transition*, and *reincorporation*

There is no better place for this transition to occur than in a wilderness setting. The wilderness is a natural place to experience Van Gennep’s first element, *separation*, given the lack of contact with the outside world, which is nearly total. In this isolated setting, students can begin the *transition*, which would come about from having to employ new attitudes, skills and knowledge (G. Meyer, personal communication, n.d. 2002) in order to survive in the unfamiliar territory of the wilderness. Students who may have been trained to think in specific ways are liberated by the need to be creative in each moment, experiencing a real life problem and then finding a unique solution. This sort of out of the box thinking can be

transferred into the classroom upon *reincorporation* into society, where it will be greatly valued in a university setting. Perhaps the most important thing students would gain from a wilderness orientation is the sense of accomplishment at having overcome a set of serious obstacles, which the wilderness often furnishes to its users. Most first-year students have never been put to the sort of tests that wilderness setting provides. The great sense of achievement at having survived for a length of time in the wilderness can foster new ways of perceiving oneself, which can prove to be a powerful asset in the brand new place that is college.

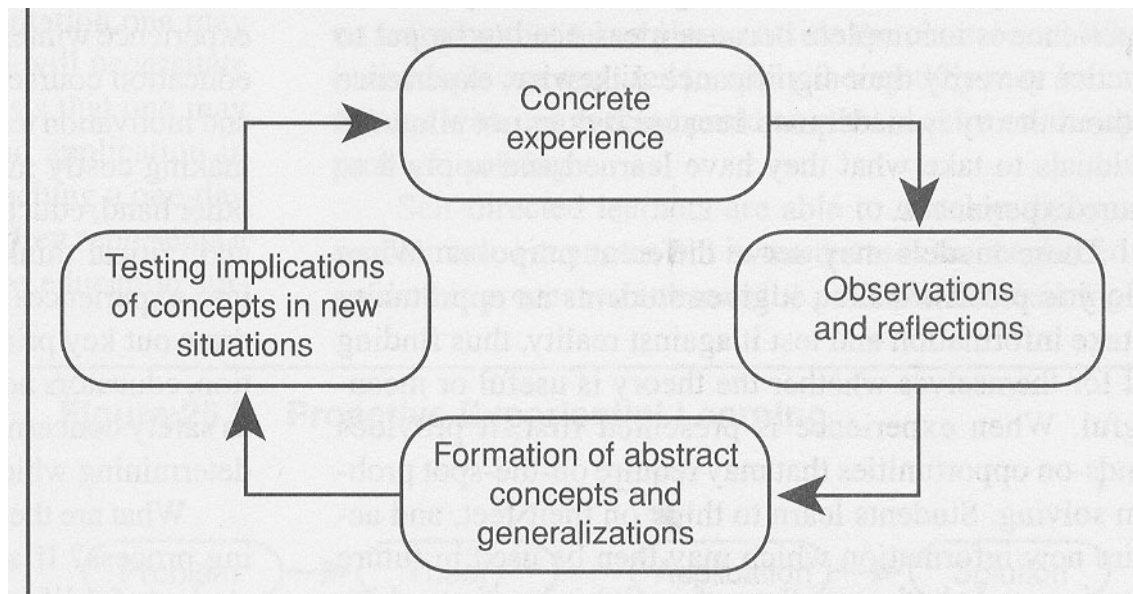
Several studies show that students who have completed a wilderness orientation are more likely to succeed in other endeavors that they pursue during college. Michael Gass' longitudinal study on the effects of an adventure orientation program on the retention of students points to this fact. Gass used three cohorts for his study: one that went through a wilderness orientation, one that went through a non-wilderness orientation, and a control group that went through no orientation. His study showed that not only were retention rates higher among the adventure education cohort than the other two cohorts, but that they also enjoyed greater success in areas such as GPA, developing interpersonal relationships, developing appropriate

relationships with the opposite sex, and in the development of tolerance. (Gass, 1987). In another study, Lanza (1998) reported that, at the University of New Hampshire, students who completed a wilderness orientation were "25 percent less likely to drop out their first year, and their grade point average are a quarter point higher than average" (p. 20). Some anecdotal evidence suggests that wilderness pursuit programs foster a greater sense of self-efficacy, which may account for the higher rates of success enjoyed by those who complete wilderness orientations. Stremba (1993) tells of a student who had difficulty climbing a mountain pass, and indeed had initially thought the pass insurmountable: "It occurred to him how many other things he tells himself are beyond his reach . . . 'If I could climb this mountain,' he said, 'I can probably do a lot of other things I have been telling myself I can't do' "(p.199).

The cycle of experiential education learned in the wilderness orientation can itself prove useful and serve as a compass for first year students in their approach to learning in a university setting. The cycle consists of a concrete experience, observations and reflections on that experience, formation of abstract concepts and generalizations, and, finally, testing implications of these concepts in new situations.

Kolb's Experiential Learning Model

(Miles & Priest, 1999, p. 189)



Students fresh out of high school experience many things at college that they probably didn't while living at home, such as extended social hours, increased levels of relations with members of the opposite sex, and increased exposure to recreational drugs and alcohol. These influences require a great deal of maturity to process in a healthy manner and, unfortunately, must be managed by the student without the aid of parental guidance. The experiential learning cycle acquired by students during the wilderness orientation can help them to responsibly meet the new freedom that college brings. Students who successfully complete a wilderness orientation can take an experience such as missing an early morning class due to late night socializing, reflect upon it, then formulate a generalization such as, "If I stay up too late,

I will probably miss my class and risk failing," and then test this generalization the next time they are tempted to party late by moderating their behavior and then be rewarded with a different experience (getting to class in the morning ready to work). Clearly, the participation in a wilderness orientation would prove beneficial to students who are in the process of maturing from post-adolescence into young adults. Not only would it serve the practical function of training students to be more responsible, but it could also serve as the experience that symbolizes their transformation into adult members of society.

Conclusion

In the Academy of Ancient Athens, new students underwent an experience much like

a wilderness orientation—the Rite of Eleusis. It was to the temple of Eleusis that the initiates would go to take part in the Mysteries. By drinking a blended brew of mint, barley and other herbs, the initiates would be taken by ecstatic visions of the mythic culture they grew up in and would emerge the next day having been brought to an understanding of what it meant to be Greek, to be human, and to be of this world. (Wheal, 2000) The Rite of Eleusis is what we're after in a wilderness orientation program—an ecstatic experience that jolts incoming college students out of their previous existence into a new world of fresh ideas and infinite possibility. The very word “ecstatic” comes from the Latin, *exstasis*, to move out of stagnation (Wheal, 2000). The formative years of high school represent that place of stagnation, a period characterized by the assimilation of society's values, norms and practices. The university is a place where students are allowed to explore these old ideas in a new light, or in some cases, to reinterpret them altogether. The departure from the commonplace as witnessed in high school is what the first year is all about, and the wilderness orientation can be an ideal place to begin that journey into higher education and adulthood.

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